The Moscow Times
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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

UN ‘Alarmed’ by Russia’s Uptick in Spying, Treason Arrests

July 18, 2023



Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich. **Sergei Kiselev / Moskva News Agency**

The United Nations has expressed alarm over the growing number of treason and espionage arrests made in Russia since Moscow invaded Ukraine last year.

Sixteen people were convicted in Russia for treason and espionage in 2022, according to UN experts on human rights and freedom of expression.

At least 43 others faced similar charges so far in 2023, they added.

The UN’s special rapporteurs Mariana Katzarova and Irene Khan voiced their concerns in the wake of Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich’s espionage arrest in Russia earlier this year.

Related article: Russia’s Arrest of Evan Gershkovich Echoes Soviet Spy Scandal

Moscow accused Gershkovich of gathering “state secrets” on orders from the United States

during a reporting trip to the Russian city of Yekaterinburg, where he was detained on March 29.

“Gershkovich’s arrest highlights the recent uptick in the use of the espionage and treason provisions of the Russian Federation Criminal Code to more frequently arrest individuals in Russia and we are alarmed by this growing trend,” UN experts said Monday.

Espionage charges carry a maximum prison sentence of 20 years. Amendments that President Vladimir Putin signed into law in April increased the maximum penalty for “high treason” from 20 years to life imprisonment.

Treason and espionage cases are held behind closed doors in Russia as they deal with what authorities consider classified information.

“It is a dangerous instrument given the gravity of the charges and the difficulty of public scrutiny in such cases,” the UN noted.

U.S. President Joe Biden said last week he was “serious” about pursuing a prisoner exchange involving Gershkovich.

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